

Message

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Subject: Mine critics blast Pebble-backed scientific talks
Attachments: www.tu.org; www.savebristolbay.org

BRISTOL BAY:

Mine critics blast Pebble-backed scientific talks

Manuel Quinones, E&E reporter

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Critics of the controversial Pebble LP gold and copper mine in southwestern Alaska are calling on a Colorado-based nonprofit group to stop scientific discussions on the project.

The Keystone Center is convening six days of discussions this month involving numerous scientists who are combing through 27,000 pages of the company's research and other information. While the group has tried to paint itself as an independent broker, groups calling the mine an unacceptable project for the Bristol Bay area say Keystone's efforts are not helpful.

"[T]he separate Keystone Center process is neither necessary nor productive and has the potential for misuse by the mine proponents that are funding it," said a letter today from several groups, including Earthjustice, the National Wildlife Federation and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Particularly egregious to mine opponents is that Keystone's discussions coincide with U.S. EPA's ongoing assessment of the effects of a potential mine on the area's watershed and valuable salmon fishery. Scientists tapped by an EPA contractor are set to soon release their own comments on the so-called watershed assessment.

Shoren Brown, Bristol Bay campaign director for the group Trout Unlimited, said the Keystone Center is facing a "pretty considerable credibility gap." He called EPA "an American agency that's accountable to American laws," while the Keystone process was being financed -- at least in part -- by Pebble.

Adding fuel to the controversy, Keystone dismissed University of Washington professor Daniel Schindler from the discussions after leaders discovered he had co-written an article critical of the Pebble mine.

Another University of Washington scientist, David Montgomery, withdrew from what he suggested was a flawed process. He, like other critics, said it is hard to weigh Pebble's scientific information without the company's mine plan.

"While the baseline data will undoubtedly be useful for project planning, one needs to assess the adequacy of these studies against a plan or an assumed scenario to evaluate whether they are adequate for impact assessment, risk analysis, or long-term monitoring," he wrote in a Sept. 15 resignation letter obtained by Greenwire.

Keystone senior associate Tom Bryan, who has been helping lead the Pebble discussions, spoke out about the controversy at one of the meetings in Anchorage yesterday.

He said Keystone would hold further discussions once Pebble releases a mine plan. And he called Schindler's dismissal "fairly traumatic" because the center was counting on him to review research on Lake Iliamna, which drains into Bristol Bay.

But Bryan said the center wanted to avoid even the perception of bias and was aiming to follow National Research Council guidelines for such panel discussions.

"So that makes it more difficult for us to find a balance," he said. "What it means is that we have to be more diligent around this policy. And when we find it, we have to take it seriously."

Keystone, led by retired U.S. diplomat Gary Grappo, was founded in 1975 as a conflict-resolution organization focused on environmental laws and policies. It has mediated disputes, including those between conservation and agricultural interests over water, land and energy use.

The center became involved in the Pebble issue in 2007. Since then, it has tapped a science advisory board and developed a plan for moving forward with a discussion on the project.

"The short answer is that the panels will speak for themselves," Bryan said in comments broadcast online. "I recognize that there is a credibility gap. We want, obviously want a balanced review of this document."

The discussions, which continue today, have been lively, with panel scientists debating with scholars in the audience about topics including earthquakes, volcanic activity and salmon.

Still, critics want the company to make more information public and in an accessible format. They also question the center's willingness to take into account outside research and whether it is paying too much deference to Pebble's work.

Carol Ann Woody, an outspoken fisheries consultant, has pointed out discrepancies among Pebble contractors over salmon populations. She said the company's research may be underestimating the count.

But Keystone's Bryan said the group wanted a "balanced review" of Pebble's baseline documents and noted how the controversy over the mine has mired the related scientific discussions. "The experiment is to see if we can get beyond that," he said.

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